

Computers in the Station

Part 1: Plain Vanilla Computers

[BALTIMORE, Maryland] Selecting and installing computers in a radio facility is a strange dance of balancing the needed horsepower – including operating systems and networks – to get the job done with the need to protect the system from a myriad of hassles, both internal and external.

Sometimes problems arise in dealing with the Information Technology (IT) folks, who often know a lot about computers, but are clueless about a radio station's operation. In an educational institution it might be those students who know everything possible about computers (or think they do). And sometimes the foe is a product from a certain large software company.

Of course, one of the bigger hassles occurs when the already overloaded engineer suddenly has a large project dropped on him – installing the various computers and connections to get a facility up and running. To make it more interesting, there is usually a short timeline attached.

If you are tasked with setting up computers in your radio station, here are some basic plans and suggestions that have been helpful in a lot of stations that do not have full time computer staff on their rosters.

BENEFITS

This thing we call a computer is supposed to: (1) remove all paper from our offices, (2) exceed all possible human productivity, (3) work 24/7/365 without fail, (4) do whatever we want. Nevertheless, it is we inferior humans that are expected to set up the computers; the result can be, shall we say, interesting.

Assuming you have come to grips with the idea that computers can be a big help in the station, but need almost as much babysitting as my 2-year-old, we can begin looking at some of the things you can do to make your life easier.

Step one, as I have said in other columns, make friends in the IT department. Do not let them look on you as a loner cowboy trying to work outside the system. Get them to understand you need a mix of “vanilla” computers for office tasks and specialized machines for special radio tasks. Involved IT people can be a *big* help when things go wrong.

WHERE TO PUT THEM

There are several areas in the radio station that can use a computer. Automation systems can provide an easy way to cover those embarrassing moments when a student “forgets” they had a show to do, or you have a holiday break and no one is around to be live.

Production systems can avoid razorblade injuries and ease the creation of new sound beds, IDs or even complete shows. Word Processing and Page Layout programs can allow for the easy communication of your staff with the school, community and suppliers (record labels, materials, gear, etc).

Web Development software will allow you to create and maintain your own web presence. Contact Management software can keep you up to speed on many aspects of the station's operations. Yes, most of these are obvious, but they all help develop real autonomy for the station and increase your “branding” control. And, being computers, they will break.

WHY CULTIVATE IT

The good news is that most of your station operations do not require a Cray supercomputer. Instead, a basic computer from your local retail center will probably be just fine. However, you will probably find the IT folks can get slightly better ones – that they will service – for about the same price.

Getting to know your IT folks, means you will be able to better understand the way computer hardware is purchased for campus. You will probably find “vanilla”

(generic) machines the IT department might buy for a computer lab or a professor's desk are available to you, often at a low cost.

You might even discover they have a budget, unrelated to your own, specifically for these machines. Another nice thing about your IT department is they probably have a life-cycle plan in place to replace/upgrade machines on a regular schedule (likely 3-5 years).

Obviously, a current model is the first choice, and it does not need huge amounts of RAM or hard drive space if it is just running office functions. This does not mean you cannot buy the latest “screamer” offered, but if money is tight, it is OK to back off a bit.

FEATURE CHECK LIST

Some features you will want to have, for ease of functions in the station, would be things like USB2.0 (PC) or Firewire (Mac) connectivity; CD burner; Ethernet and/or Modem cards; and I would suggest flat display monitors for space conservation. Virtually all of these machines will come with on-board video and sound support. If you plan to do any voice-tracking or production on these machines, consider a decent quality add on sound card such as the MIA from Echo, which I use.



These basic machines will likely need to connect to the Internet, right? OK, let me tell you something I have learned about students: they may be well versed in *having* computers, but they are not very good at *protecting* them. If your students have Internet access, you will have virus and spyware problems within hours of their first connection – if they can check their email on the machines, maybe even faster.

Let me save you some of the days of headache I went through and direct you to www.merijn.org. Download or follow links to get: Spybot Search & Destroy, Spyware Blaster, Bug Off, Hijack This!, and CWS Shredder software. Also go to www.lavasoft.com and get Ad-Aware SE. Immediately after installing them, make sure you run their update functions.

If these are new machines with your IT department's installations and blessings, they will probably already have an anti-virus program installed (hopefully with auto-updates enabled). If not, you should be immediately buying Norton or MacAfee's anti-virus software and installing it. If these machines came pre-loaded with software, you may want to remove and/or disable a lot of it.

ENSURE PROTECTION IS IN PLACE

Step one, however, for any new machine in your station is to load all the above anti-spyware, anti-hijacker and anti-virus programs. Many of them (Ad-Aware, Spybot, Norton, MacAfee) are active scanning programs that keep an eye on everyone trying to come into your house (kind of like having a bodyguard frisking everyone at the front door).

Others, like Spyware Blaster and Bug Off are extra locks and bolts on the doors. Hijack This! and CWS Shredder are programs for finding and/or fixing machines that already have an intruder present.

A brief note on the security software above – it is all *free*. But, it is all written and maintained by people that need to eat, have massive bandwidth use and other issues to deal with, so they ask you to donate something if you use their software.

No, it is not mandatory, and you can probably sleep at night without paying, but *please* do support these folks. Once they have saved your system, you will understand why it is so amazing that they do not force you to pay up front. Read the CWS Chronicles on the merijn site to understand how much work has gone into this security effort.

PRODUCTIVITY APPLICATIONS

Once you have all these systems in place, you can begin adding operational software to make life better at the station, like Office or other programs. These are probably already in use all over your campus and available through your IT folks under educational pricing.

Basic machines should be set up with common software sets for office functions. I would suggest Microsoft's Office suite for Windows victims and Claris Works for Mac users. In both cases this will provide your office staff with simple word processing and communications options and allow them to create and trade templates for press releases, letterhead, faxing and other functions, keeping your image consistent.

These packages can be supplemented with something nice like Adobe's Create Suite set which includes all of the visual design software you could ever use. It will allow you to do web development, graphics, photo editing, page layouts and more.

SAVE MONEY

The nicest thing about all of the above items? *Educational Pricing!* While Creative Suite lists for about \$1,200, the educational package price is \$200! Let me repeat that: Retail \$1,200, Educational \$200. Again, making friends with your IT folks will make it easier to get into the educational purchasing process.

The Music Director, Business Manager and others will all thank you if you run a contact management program like ACT! on at least one machine. It will allow them to not only database all their contacts, but create templates, communication records, email and document attachments, etc. ACT! is a fairly inexpensive way to keep all that information available for these important positions and keep everyone current on communications. Oh, and make darn sure you back up that database!

These programs have many custom options; if you are not comfortable with “tweaking” your system, just let them auto install. However, *do not* set any of these programs (including the operating system) to auto install updates. With the exception of anti-virus and anti-spyware programs, you should review any update before it installs, and be certain it will not cause new problems in your system.

Get in the habit of setting aside one day a week as “computer day” and making sure you check all the security programs for updates and run full system scans. These take time and can prevent use of the machines while running, so plan them accordingly. Run your operating systems update check, and download critical patches, but check in with the IT folks before downloading any major upgrades (like SP2) to verify that all is well.

OUTPUT TOO

Another wise choice is an integrated scanner/printer/copier. Ours is in constant use producing DJ flyers, scanning pictures and printing everything else. A cheap inkjet printer in a common area of the station is used for general things, which often means student papers. A networked printer is ideal, but can be expensive. See if there is network printing available through your IT pals – you may find a way to do that with an existing machine on campus.

In part two, we will get into some of the more specialized items you need to consider for specific operations like Automation, Production, etc. Here are the key points you should remember from this column: Always install and update security software; support shareware; make friends in IT; and get a nap.

John Deveck built WLOY from the ground up, and is happy to share the tricks and traps he has learned in the process. Email John at wloy@loyola.edu